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SUBJECT: IDPS AND ECONOMIC MIGRANTS STUCK IN SLUMS ADJACENT
TO SADR CITY

Summary

¶1. (U) USAID/OFDA,s program advisor in Iraq conducts regular field visits to locations of displacement and return to assess humanitarian conditions and identify areas of possible intervention by implementing partners. On June 24 and 25 the program advisor met with residents of northeast Baghdad,s Hay Ur neighborhood, a vulnerable community adjacent to Sadr City inhabited largely by economic migrants and internally displaced persons (IDPs). Hay Ur residents report the unlikelihood of returning to areas of origin due to demographic changes following sectarian violence, housing shortages and rising rents. End summary.

Background on Hay Ur

¶2. (U) Thousands of IDPs and economic migrants have built illegal, informal settlements on government property in northeast Baghdad,s predominantly Shia Hay Ur neighborhood. U.S. military satellite imagery taken from 2003 to 2009 illustrates that entire neighborhoods in the northernmost parts of Hay Ur are less than six years old and growing steadily. The settlements are straining essential services and forcing the Government of Iraq (GoI) to choose between recognizing sprawling illegal settlements with little supporting infrastructure or evicting thousands of destitute families. In several sub-neighborhoods of northern Hay Ur, including Kufa, Sheeshan, Kubra Ghazlan and Hawasams, most houses are constructed of cinderblock, mud and scrap metal.

¶3. (U) Residents report that people fleeing violence and overcrowding in adjacent Sadr City began settling in Hay Ur in 2003 and 2004 at a rate that has continued steadily to date. Many of the conflict-affected IDPs currently residing in Hay Ur fled from predominantly Sunni areas of west Baghdad, including Abu Ghraib, Adhamiya and Ameriya. About half of the residents who spoke to USAID/OFDA program advisor during a walk through Mahalla 329 (mahallahs are numbered subdivisions of neighborhoods; generally sub-neighborhoods are made up of two or more mahallahs) were economic migrants from Sadr City. One area in Mahalla 341 is named Hawasams, an Arabic word unique to the Iraqi dialect meaning looted goods. Priority needs in the area include improved access to drinking water, income generating projects and shelter support.

Government Reluctant to Reward Squatters with Services

¶4. (SBU) By illegally tapping into water and electric lines, squatters have further degraded the already limited infrastructure providing services to Hay Ur,s illegal neighborhoods. U.S. forces report that the neighborhood council and the Amanat (which is responsible for providing essential services inside the city of Baghdad) have proven hesitant to improve services, which authorities perceive as increasing the likelihood of long-term settlement in the squatted areas. Because most areas of Hay Ur, including legal residential zones, lack sewage networks, human waste gathers in open trenches in the street. Residents report that local authorities do not remove waste from trenches, leaving it to seep into the ground water. U.S. forces report that the local government also refuses to remove trash in illegal settlements, leading to trash heaps that attract stray dogs and rodents. U.S. forces have responded by using Commanders Emergency Response Program (CERP) funds to pay

military-aged Iraqi men to remove trash.

¶5. (SBU) Residents told USAID/OFDA staff that although children are allowed to register in public schools, the schools are in a state of disrepair and run two shifts due to overcrowding. U.S. forces report that local authorities have Overcrowding. U.S. forces report that local authorities have poorly maintained CEPRA-rehabilitated schools. Because there is no hospital in the area, people with serious injuries are transported by taxi to adjacent Sadr City. U.S. forces built a primary health care center in Hay Ur's Mahallah 327 and report that the Ministry of Health has staffed the clinic. Although the ministry pays clinic staff, staff complain that the ministry fails to provide needed medical supplies. According to residents, most IDPs do not receive food rations, whereas economic migrants have generally transferred food rations to Hay Ur or travel to areas of origin once per month to receive rations.

¶6. (SBU) Residents identified jobs and improved access to water as priority needs. U.S. forces offered to provide CERP funding to dig a well in Mahallah 629, but the neighborhood council could not commit to maintaining the necessary filtration system. Local authorities are currently extending water lines from Sadr City across Hay Ur to Shaab, which is expected to improve access to water for some residents.

¶7. (U) Residents reported that eight IDP families living in tents in Mahallah 329 recently left for unknown reasons, although neighbors reported that the departure was not due to forced eviction. Approximately 40 families continue to squat in an abandoned warehouse adjacent to the Joint Security Station, which will remain open for the immediate future.

Illegal Property Market Largely Non-Confrontational

¶8. (SBU) Residents reported that the process of illegally acquiring land in the area is generally non-confrontational

BAGHDAD 00001803 002 OF 002

and that money does not typically change hands for empty plots of land. For security reasons, many residents said they would only allow friends, family or acquaintances to move onto adjacent land. Like many illegal neighborhoods in Baghdad, several structures bore &for sale signs, indicating a thriving illegal property market. (Comment: In previous years and even now in some parts of Baghdad, squatters are unable to build on vacant government property without paying off a local militia leader or other community figure. Squatters who attempt to build without paying bribes in such areas are likely to be confronted with violence. End comment.)

New Residents Arrive Steadily, Current Residents Unlikely to Leave Voluntarily

¶9. (U) Residents reported that squatters continue to build illegal houses in the area, and USAID/OFDA staff witnessed dozens of makeshift houses in various states of construction.

A local merchant selling building materials told USAID/OFDA staff that business has slowed slightly due to concerns that GoI authorities will evict squatters from the area, but that generally arrivals to the area continue apace.

¶10. (U) IDPs reported that they are unlikely to return to areas of origin due to demographic changes, security concerns and lack of affordable housing. Economic migrants were mostly from Sadr City and reported that they are unlikely to return because of overcrowding and lack of services in the area.

Comment

¶11. (SBU) Hay Ur's illegal neighborhoods and similar IDP and squatter clusters throughout the country leave the GoI with two potential courses of action. The first involves the eviction of poor squatters who in many cases have nowhere else to go in order to regain de facto control of the government land. The second is to allow squatters to remain in place, which would provide tacit approval of illegal seizures of public property. After a brief flurry of evictions in late 2008 and early 2009, the GoI declared a one-year moratorium on evictions from government property. In isolated cases, such as Al-Batool camp in northwest Baghdad and Al-Manathera camp in Najaf, the GoI paid IDPs and economic migrants sums ranging from \$800 to \$3200 in exchange

for voluntarily leaving squatter settlements. Budget constraints render similar payouts to other clusters unlikely. Moreover, amid a severe housing shortage and skyrocketing rents that average at least \$900 per month for a three bedroom house in Baghdad's safest areas, such sums would not provide a durable solution for those who left squatter settlements voluntarily.

¶112. (U) Comment continued: Following field visits, USAID/OFDA staff share findings on priority needs and possible interventions with the Ministry of Displacement and Migration and USAID/OFDA implementing partners with programs in the area. Implementing partners respond depending on available funds and how proposed interventions fit with ongoing and planned activities. End comment.

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